FIELD

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December 30th

Dear Sandra & Henry:

Thank you for your Cardinal card...they are seen around Boston occasionally, too. I'm glad you like Iowa (I never get that state right - as the old lady said, "In my day, they pronounced it Ohio...") - I simply can't imagine what that part of the world is like. // I know I owe you a long letter - or 2 - but I've brought just a few addresses with me, hoping to get a little work done while here. I came down on the 27th to stay in friends' "guest house" - very nice, quite luxurious, until the 11th of Jan., to recover from what has been a very trying term - I don't know quite why - or maybe because of moving and one unusually dumb class...poor dears - I'm still correcting their papers, with a sinking heart. Jimmy M. told me, Sandra, how much he enjoyed reading with you & how well you did. Dan H. wrote me - long ago - how much he enjoyed you both - & did he go fishing with Henry? I think he must have... I can't imagine being taught - I'm so easy - however, one student at the Un. of Mass. (a friend taught me there) wrote that perhaps "Sestina" was the name of my grandmother... & another that in the "Armadillo" the animals and I had had "an experience none of them wd. ever forget..." I shd. take about 1/10th as long as M. Moore, however

With much love to you - to Phoebe & a Happy New Year - Elizabeth

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FIELD

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ELIZABETH BISHOP

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

ELIZABETH BISHOP: A SYMPOSIUM

No particular anniversary or occasion has produced this tribute to Elizabeth Bishop, just the simple wish to honor her poetic canon, five years after her death.

Some readers have known and loved Bishop's poems for years. Others have discovered her very recently. The number of her admirers seems to be growing steadily. Ask them just what it is they especially prize about her poetry and you will get a host of different answers. You may also get speechlessness: it is difficult to put words to one's sense of this poet's complex and sometimes startling greatness. One fact seems clear: affection for her poems cuts right across lines of gender, region, school, fashion, or whatever else might make her the special spokesperson of a special group; the universality of her appeal is increasingly evident, and it is reassuring.

As is our custom in these symposia, we asked the poets to tell us what they think, and we had more volunteers than we could accommodate. Our essayist's choices of poems and particular reasons for admiration vary greatly, but they seem to agree that Bishop's solutions to problems they face — when to put the self in, when to leave it out, what to write about, how to start, when to stop, how to handle one's relation to tradition and technique — are brilliant and surprising. They also tend to acknowledge her way of requiring that her poems accommodate the smallest details and the largest issues. Her patience, and her willingness to write fewer poems so that she could write better ones, are clearly exemplary for her fellow poets. We wish she could read what they say about her here. It would surely please her to know how many different ways they have found to say that they find her work, in Jean Valentine's thoughtful adjective, "redemptive."

Special thanks to Farrar, Straus & Giroux for permission to reprint the Bishop poems, and to Sandra McPherson and Henry Carlile for their Elizabeth Bishop postcard.

THE ARMADILLO

for Robert Lowell

This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,

rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.

Once up against the sky it's hard
to tell them from the stars —
planets, that is — the tinted ones:
Venus going down, or Mars,

or the pale green one. With a wind,
they flare and falter, wobble and toss;
but if it's still they steer between
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

receding, dwindling, solemnly
and steadily forsaking us,
or, in the downdraft from a peak,
suddenly turning dangerous.

Last night another big one fell.
It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house.
The flame ran down. We saw the pair

of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until
they shrieked up out of sight.

The ancient owls' nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down,

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.
So soft! — a handful of intangible ash
with fixed, ignited eyes.

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!

Sandra McPherson

"THE ARMADILLO": A COMMENTARY

I don't know if there will be Elizabeth Bishop scholars making their living writing exegesis-after-theoretical-analysis of her poems. Because those poems seem supremely self-sufficient. Nonetheless, every year some student says, "I bought the Bishop like you said; sometime could you tell me what's so great about her?" Then I try to think back to before I knew her, so my judgment will not be colored by personal loyalty. At age 21 or 22, I felt that I needed to read EB to learn how to use *anything* as the subject of the poem or as an object in the poem. Her work said, if you like things enough they'll stay alive even in a poem, whatever their nature. And another thing: her work *didn't* say "I am a poet." In fact, the *I* was omitted from her work for pages on end, the better to show her affection for her subjects.

One can't add to "The Armadillo." It happens to be the Fourth of July and we can hear illegal noises of shock and delight. I have never seen fire balloons, though. For six stanzas we watch her guide us through them, before we come to the animals. The poem is 60% balloon, 13% owl, 13% rabbit, 13% armadillo — a strange proportion. One of her trademarks is taking time to notice details and to state them in the slowed-down wording of musing: the third through fifth lines of this passage, for instance —

> Once up against the sky it's hard
> to tell them from the stars —
> planets, that is — the tinted ones;
> Venus going down, or Mars,
>
> or the pale green one.

We're glad she didn't know the name of "the pale green one." That wording makes her an observer, not an expert in an ob-

servatory. Again, when "a baby rabbit jumped out, / *short*-eared, to our surprise," she is not so startled by the flashier fire balloons that she can't save a line for both the short ears and her surprise.

In this poem she's skillful at both slow and quick portraiture. The patient portrayal of the balloons through eighteen applicable verbs; the quickly-realized sketch of the "glistening armadillo . . . / rose-flecked, head down, tail down / . . . and a weak mailed fist / clenched ignorant against the sky."

The last stanza is something I wouldn't have predicted from Miss Bishop. An outcry in italics. Every emotion (beauty, mockery, fear, panic, anger, frustration, bafflement) is highlighted and exclamation-marked. This is the conclusion to her patient lines. She began saying this was the time of year such events happen. I like this poem partly because this is the time of *life* they happen. And I fear the poem because this is the century, the administration, in which they happen to those whose armor is weakest.

4 July 1983

FILLING STATION

Oh, but it is dirty!
— this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.
Be careful with that match!

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it's a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?
It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
the only note of color —
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch
with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
ESSO — SO — SO — SO
to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.

David Walker

ELIZABETH BISHOP AND THE ORDINARY

To read through Elizabeth Bishop's poems, now collected under one elegant roof, is to re-experience all those qualities for which she is celebrated, not least her skills as guide to the marvelous and the arcane. As the titles of her individual volumes suggest, Bishop was fascinated by the experience of travel, the extremes of geography and the varieties of human experience. Her precise and penetrating sense of observation allows us to visit landscapes from Cape Breton to Key West, from Paris to Mexico and her tapestried, extravagant Brazil. Her taste for the extraordinary also produced poems displaced into the strange worlds of history ("Brazil, January 1, 1502"), myth ("The Gentleman of Shalott," "The Prodigal"), and literature ("Crusoe in England"). What keeps these poems from representing mere exotica or a tourist's souvenirs is that Bishop herself always remains present as a kind of balancing or qualifying element, never content simply to accept the glittering surface as given, always probing for the echo of something richer and more resonant beneath. The details of Bishop's poems are always compelling, but they are never the whole point, even in those apparently most purely "descriptive." The true subject of the travel poems is the mysterious act of perception by means of which we learn to distinguish ourselves from the peculiar landscape and the bizarre artifact, and also to discover what binds us to them.

Perhaps less often recognized is Bishop's interest in the plainly and even stubbornly ordinary. Her curiosity extends to the mundane and the banal, the universal emotion and the domestic scene, and here the process of perception is equally crucial: it is the fierce intelligence and affectionate accuracy with which such subjects are evoked that makes them seem so fully worthy of our attention. In a poem like "Filling Station," the ordinary becomes mysterious, revelatory, unique.

The first line demonstrates the sort of ambiguities from which the poem is constructed, immediately raising questions of

situation, voice, and tone. (I've sometimes thought "Filling Station" would make a good exercise for acting students, given the number of different ways the first line — and much of the rest — might be stressed.) Is the opening exclamation solemn and child-like, or prissy and fastidious, or enthusiastic? All we can identify with certainty, I think, is the quality of fascination, the intent gaze on the filling station's pure oiliness. Nor is the scale on which the observation takes place very clear. Filling stations can, after all, be pretty dirty places, and yet there's something peculiar about an oiliness so deep that it turns the whole place translucent, almost into the essence of oil itself. And just how "little" is this place, anyway? Try to imagine Bishop standing across the street observing, and it doesn't work: the quizzical tone seems to miniaturize the filling station and divorce it from any context, as though its designer were Mother Goose or Walt Disney. (Or, more appropriately, Joseph Cornell, a favorite of Bishop's, and who with Edward Hopper seems to have had a hand in the poem's origins.) The sense of the miniature and the fabulatory is developed in the second stanza, where the human element is introduced in the form of a generic Father and his generic saucy sons, all cut from the same oily cloth — though the cheeriness of this is characteristically qualified if we notice that Father's costume doesn't fit, or that Mother seems to be absent from the scene.

In the third stanza, the accumulation of details is matched by an increasing involvement on the part of the speaker. Curiosity ("Do they live in the station?") overtakes description, as she tries to probe beyond the flat, drab, objectified surface to the human meaning beneath. By this point the oiliness has become so pervasive that the "set of crushed and grease- / impregnated wicker-work" may seem like appropriate designer decor, and the "quite comfy" dirty dog sounds the detached, parodic note even more strongly. But in the next stanza the camera bores in more relentlessly, almost obsessively listing the dumb details, qualifying and repeating ("the only note of color — / of certain color," "a big doily . . . a big hirsute begonia") until it's clear that the per-

ceiver has somehow become implicated in the scene. And the mask of detachment is shaken by the pressure of questions breaking through:

> Why the extraneous plant?
> Why the taboret?
> Why, oh why, the doily?

Clearly, much is at stake here. I'm reminded of Frost's poem "Design," which also seeks to discover a meaningful pattern in apparently random details, but whereas that poem points uncomfortably toward a sinister architecture in the world of nature, here the speaker seeks to understand a goofy "extraneous" beauty, a concern for harmony at the heart of this oil-soaked darkness. Her answer comes — and here the poem is at its most mysterious — in the final stanza, a vision of domestic attention anonymously embodied. It's a measure of the poem's richness that it's difficult to tell metaphysical or even theological implications here from a parody of them. The tone is quiet and delicate, but also bemused ("Somebody waters the plant, / or oils it, maybe"), and we're left facing the irony that the poem's final proof of "love" is a row of Esso cans. What I find most remarkable is that all these opposing elements are held in perfect balance. On repeated readings the mystery deepens rather than resolving itself: I think no other poet of Bishop's generation could manage such poignance and wit simultaneously.

AT THE FISHHOUSES

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
among the wild jagged rocks,
is of an apparent translucence
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.
The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with small iridescent flies crawling on them.
Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted.
The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.

We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
the blade of which is almost worn away.

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Elizabeth Spires

QUESTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

"At the Fishhouses" by Elizabeth Bishop is a meditation on empirical knowledge vs. absolute truth, the human problem of 'netting' or knowing anything with any degree of certainty in a physically ever-changing world. As the poem opens, Bishop details a darkening Nova Scotian landscape in literal and metaphorical decline. Early on, the poet introduces the means by which the scene is to be mediated, the five senses represented by the five fishhouses, the senses mediating between the mind ("storerooms in the gables") and the external world. All five senses come strongly into play as the poem progresses. Land and water are seen as distinctly opposed entities with the poem's stanzaic structure reinforcing this opposition. The descriptive focus of the first stanza centers on land whose silver surfaces at dusk are of "an apparent translucence." In contrast, the sea is opaque and apparently conscious, described as "swelling slowly as if considering spilling over," its silver surface hiding a quite different kind of knowledge, one not necessarily apprehended by the senses. And yet, the word "apparent" qualifies the land's seeming translucence, hinting at illusion or disguise and suggesting limits on what can be known or apprehended even as we stand on solid ground.

The emphasis then in the dense descriptive lines of the first stanza is on the *appearance* of things. The old man, both Time personified and in time himself, links the invisible past of the poet's dead grandfather with the immediate present:

> There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
> He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
> from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
> the blade of which is almost worn away.

The repetitive physical action described parallels the eroding action of time itself and places an implicit value on surface appearance: the fish scales, likened to sequins, are, importantly, "the principal beauty," the flies crawling on the fish tubs "iridescent."

The old man's knife is talismanic, an earlier incarnation, we can guess, of Crusoe's knife in "Crusoe in England."

Up to this point, a kind of impersonal visual esthetics has predominated. The short middle stanza serves as a mediating passage between the disparate elements of land and water. Poetically self-referential, the lines," . . . thin silver / tree trunks are laid horizontally / across the gray stones, down and down / at intervals of four or five feet," describe the actual construction of the poem, the horizontal laying down of the lines and the descent at (musical and temporal) intervals of four or five (poetic) feet into a sea of knowledge.

It is at this point, with the opening of the third stanza, that the poem lifts with rhetorical grandeur into Bishop's 'high style' even as it makes its descent into the "Cold dark deep" of the sea. The sea, as a representation of absolute knowledge, of knowledge out of time, is an "element bearable to no mortal," in stark opposition to the half-truths and "apparent" perceptions of ordinary human existence. The gravity of the statement is counterbalanced by the seemingly playful scene with the seal. The seal's presence is crucial. Without it, the sea would be utterly inhuman and non-relational. The creature is presented as a skeptical, yet kindred intelligence, like the poet, "a believer in total immersion." The seal's bemused and curious reaction to the singing of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" raises the question as to the spirit in which the speaker sings the hymn. Seriously? Playfully? Presumably the latter, given the tone of the scene.

The haunting echo-effect of repeating the line "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear" moves the poem toward a powerful and sweeping conclusion. Behind the speaker and seal, temporally as well as spatially, "a million Christmas trees stand waiting for Christmas." The Christmas trees seem both hopeful and wistful projections, signifying perhaps the poet's yearning for the lost innocence of an earlier time. The value of repeated sensory experience is emphasized over the nostalgic or sentimental with the line, "I have seen it over and over," as if the senses were a means to at least a partial apprehension of

a higher order of knowledge. The poet's desire for absolute knowledge, some contact with omniscience, through secular or poetic epiphany takes the form of an invitation to the reader to participate in a painful baptism:

> If you should dip your hand in,
> your wrist would ache immediately,
> your bones would begin to ache and your hand would
> burn
> as if the water were a transmutation of fire
> that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.

The utter physicality of the action is a comment on the limitations of the corporeal state as well as being a metaphoric statement: the body a metaphor for the spirit or soul, and one's ability to suffer or accept physical pain a metaphor for the soul's growth.

The idea of knowledge as an outgrowth of pain or adversity is developed further by the startling image of "the cold hard mouth" and "rocky breasts" of the world. The world, as posited by Bishop, is a harsh mother, neither nurturing nor protective. Considering the poem was written in an historically dark period (1945 or 1946), one must read "At the Fishhouses" as a poem allusive not only to private pain but to the pain of history. The complex and highly paradoxical nature of knowledge is both "dark" and "clear," a necessary contradiction, like the formed formlessness of the sea, and "moving" not only in the sense of fluidity but in the sense of being able to arouse emotion. (A handwritten early draft rendered the attributes more positively: "beautiful, clear, dark, utterly free.") The bitter briny 'taste' of knowledge is also the taste of tears, related to the tears alluded to at the beginning of the poem:

> The air smells so strong of codfish
> it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.

By the poem's end, these are no longer the simple tears of sensation. They have become the tears of a feeling intelligence in a shifting world of appearance.

"At the Fishhouses" insists that what little we know to be true keeps changing. The stance is both heroic and tragic. And yet we can trust that for Elizabeth Bishop, "a believer in total immersion," the pursuit of knowledge, however evanescent, extended much farther than dipping only a wrist in truth's cold dark deep element.

THE END OF MARCH

For John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read: Duxbury

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
— *it* was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost. . . .
A kite string? — But no kite.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of — are they railroad ties?

(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a *grog à l'américaine*.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window.
There must be a stove; there *is* a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
— at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by — perfect! But — impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
The sun came out for just a minute.
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
the drab, damp, scattered stones
were multi-colored,
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
— a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

ORIGINAL SHELL

"The End of March," like so much of Elizabeth Bishop, travels well. The poem appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1975. I cut it out, and after her death, took it with me to Taiwan for a couple of years: a map, a kind of message scrawled suddenly, sadly, and kept. Only one walk I took ever resembled it at all, but I gladly took that one glaring morning. After stretches of hot machine-and-concrete gutted land, my husband and I crossed a small bridge, entered a bamboo thicket. Deep shade, its hazy quiet. Relief enough. But nothing prepared us for the real treasure: the cabin of split bamboo, the tiny porch, chickens in idle happiness, fruit in a wooden bowl. What a bare and hospitable place. We peered in every window. Absolutely empty! Abandoned? Impossible. Every inch spoke, suggested, sang. We hurried off, feeling marvelous and guilty, savoring each detail of the place as though it were possible to us, lived in for years, loved.

Possible. Even when it is not in front of me, no longer tied to words on a page, "The End of March" keeps intact its kernel of sense and solitude, coming forward in the mind physically and imaginatively through that strange "artichoke of a house." Here power increases by careful timing. Two stanzas of annoyances precede it: foul weather, the inexplicable string and footprints, the prosaic stop-start web of italics, parenthesis, comparison, complaint. Not a pretty landscape. What it is, is interesting, withholding more than it offers — inscrutable in spite of any human rush for meaning or loveliness. What it is, most of all, is possible. This sense of possibility — a lack of the inevitable, finally, of ego — is pure Bishop; we enter so many of her poems on that offhand silk. "It was cold and windy, scarcely the day / to take a walk on that long beach." Consider yourself warned, I read. So we are reckoned with, not assumed or condescended to in the odd invitation. And of course the house, where these two meandering, hard-working stanzas are headed, is not the house beautiful retreat of the writer, but "dubious," "a crooked box," in short —

possible. At once it is ours too: something longing creates, the eccentric dream.

What delights is that eccentricity. "I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house, my crypto-dream-house. . . ." In the half-frozen muddy stupor of the walk, that voice — joking, matter-of-fact — wakes us. Yet what a pathetic, lovely, cartoonish place it points to: shingled greener than the artichoke, "(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?)", makeshift, shielded by railroad ties, a chimmey, "askew . . . braced with wires." A gem of flotsam set adrift against murky seascape. And how careful Bishop is to know it, in busy proprietorship, assuming stove, electricity from a few feeble wires, finding its pilings for us, imagining spring tides. But more, right before our eyes, she has moved in, joyously and for good, her days and nights already planned, or rather, quite rescued from plan. *Nothing*, she emphasizes, to do nothing, "or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms."

Of course Bishop's "nothing" brims with life and humor: books to read, but of a specific nature — old, long and boring; things to write, but just "useless notes"; conversations but only the kind of consoling, ranting banter one practices alone. After dark, the splendid moment arrives, lit double against the window, when the final drink is readied, its flame "lovely diaphanous blue." So the house — this unlikely wreck propped up against confusing shoreline — becomes, in the deepest sense, inhabited, and in the most authentic way, renewing.

Maybe all poems, in one way or another, redefine shelter. One enters such places and notices things. More simply, one enters and closes the door. It was Gaston Bachelard's notion in his *Poetics of Space* that *the house* as image and fact, began and ended here: to shield the dreamer, to allow one "to dream in peace," to return us, be the structure palatial or primitive, to that immediate sure sense of "the original shell" and so into well-being, into memory and thought. Solitude surrounds these rooms; however fanciful Bishop's "nothing," her boredom clears the place for private truth. Risk in her poem — the long and difficult trek down

the unseasonable beach — is stalking something of crucial value: safety.

Safety. How safe are we? She could have turned up a collar, buttoned a higher button, holding forth feverishly on the cutting wind. So goes another poetic opportunity. Instead, with sharp flourish, we are plucked out of the weather into warmth and grace and light — enough "to read by" anyway — maybe. Now when I take up this poem, I read for this stanza, hope for its rescue. Here are the confusions of the world. We pass through them. And here, in the shoddy lean-to, is sense. They are a separate music, each quite indifferently drowning out the other. Bishop is no idealist; we are where we are. There is little reason for it, only forbearance before it, or gratitude.

Maybe things go harder, more complex than this. Characteristically, Bishop refuses to leave us glad and alone in our elation, and gently, reasonably leads us, where? Simply *back*. " . . . — perfect! But — impossible." The fact remains that no place exists —not on that day at least — and never, in spite of Bishop's sweet invention, either day or night spent there. The wind, "too cold," the house no doubt "boarded up," the return's small comfort is that now the *other* side of the face is freezing. Yet in anything by Elizabeth Bishop, such a deprecating remark should make us suspect.

In fact, something happens. This is a journey; we hold the map in our hands and it is changed as it is traveled. In a moment, "the drab, damp, scattered stones" assume color and movement into shadow. In a moment, resolution, almost too fantastic — but of course Bishop knows this — takes a playful leap. At once, the artifacts — footprints, string — of an earlier bedevilment are cleared. Suddenly no return is possible. No going back. Wherever that odd artichoke of a house continues — its single wire bolted so wryly, reluctantly to the world — I know one goes there to begin.

"THE END OF MARCH"

"The End of March," one of the later poems out of *Geography III*, may not belong in the canon of great Elizabeth Bishop poems, but perhaps that makes it all the more interesting to consider (and the canon all that more amazing to regard) since it still gives such obvious proof of what has become, to my mind anyway, the great secret gift Bishop left behind: her enormous and indefatigable *Patience*.

Ezra Pound's dictum was simple and unequivocal: *Condensare*: condense, compress, tighten, squeeze. And no matter how shortsighted Imagism may have been, and no matter what poets have felt about Pound's theories since, that single principle of composition has held enormous sway over American poetry in this century. But then, one is tempted to say, along came Elizabeth Bishop, and along came poems like "The End of March," and long before it poems like "The Map," "A Cold Spring," "The Bight," "At the Fishhouses," "Questions of Travel," "The Armadillo," and "Under the Window: Ouro Preto" (masterpieces, every one). And suddenly something very different seemed to be happening.

It is a principle of physics that when matter is compressed it becomes more volatile, and it's a similar principle that seems to govern Pound's notion of the image. Through a process of intense concentration on some particular detail, the detail itself takes on a kind of heightened energy it wouldn't ordinarily have. In terms of time, that concentration is achieved by hurrying things up, by accelerating the pace of the poem — the emotional complex caught in an *instant* of time. Bishop's poems, on the other hand, make use of an entirely different conception of time. The method seems almost to be in the *waiting*, in allowing the imagination to *linger*, in the feeling that the eye can *take its own sweet time*. The process at last becomes as important to the poem as the thing which set the process in motion.

One of the things that happens as a result is that the poet's own intuitive responses to the world become just another series of things within the world. And the instant of revelation — a phrase, I'm sure, Bishop would not have felt comfortable with — that instant gives way to an ongoing contemplation. As Bishop explains it in her own aside from "Poem": " 'visions' is / too serious a word — our looks."

In one sense, what Bishop has done is demystify the poet by exposing the inner workings of the poem. It is an effect that's similar, I would guess, to that created by a magician who, while performing his illusions, keeps telling the audience how he creates those illusions: you might be just as fascinated by the illusions themselves, but you would no longer be able to pretend they were magic. Consider the following six lines, for example:

> The sun came out for just a minute.
> For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
> the drab, damp, scattered stones
> were multi-colored,
> and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
> individual shadows, then pulled them in again.

It's interesting to see how casually the "poet" is eclipsed by those lines — not only by appearing to take so little credit for her discoveries (what are they, after all, she seems to be saying, but simple observations), but also, and more importantly, by refusing to make the image appear more "magical" than it really is. A lesser poet, or at least a different one, might have condensed this to a quatrain:

> Set in their bezels of sand,
> the multi-colored stones
> threw out long shadows
> then pulled them in again.

The difference is rather amazing (especially considering that nothing has been added). In this version the image seems much more "luminous," as Pound would say — that is, much more mag-

ical — and so the poet's presence in the poem is, to that same degree, much more conspicuous. One can see how, by simply speeding up or compressing the stanza, the poet appears more clearly the source of the image, the magician pretending to his imaginary powers. But in Bishop's version we are given the process as well, we are shown how the image arrived quite naturally from a complex of forces in the world itself (though perhaps that too is just another illusion). The poet's role is now a more modest one, and the accumulation of fairly predictable adjectives — "drab," "damp," "scattered," "multi-colored," "long," "individual" — those words only serve to make the whole event seem that much more commonplace, that much less magical.

Bishop's sense of reserve, both in and out of her work, is famous by now, and it's perhaps just that reserve which makes so loveable the abundance of those characteristic little asides in her poems, those moments when she suddenly and rather merrily (a little like Hitchcock) pops up out of nowhere and corrects her first perception, or readjusts the focus a little, or asks a question, or just for the hell of it takes a bow. Look how she does each of those things in just seven lines:

> . . . that crooked box
> set up on pilings, shingled green,
> a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
> (boiled with bicarbonate of soda?)
> protected from spring tides by a palisade
> of — are they railroad ties?
> (Many things about this place are dubious.)

If poems were written in Eternity, or Heaven, I suspect they would sound a little like that — so free of anxiety, so unhurried, as if they had all the time in the world.

What Bishop's patience restores to our poetry is a wonderful and disarming sense of play, a sense that has its roots in what Emerson described as "the joy of the beholding and jubilant soul." Or, to put it more simply, she is someone who seems to take immeasureable delight in just looking around. It's because of

that, I think, that we (as readers) feel so awfully lucky to just be around when she's doing something as ordinary as taking a walk on the beach, and "in rubber boots" no less! — a detail as endearing as the one about Auden strolling along the great wall of China in his bedroom slippers.

One other marvelous thing about "The End of March" — and this goes hand in hand with that modesty — is the surprising quietness of its surface. How *close* that first stanza comes to being simply prosaic. And what saves it? Perhaps just the rather cagey placement of the three rhymed adjectives "rackety," "icy," and "steely" (because the first two are set back to back, we do remember when, five lines later, we get to the third), and the beautiful alliteration of "l" sounds in the penultimate line. But then quietness is just another form of Bishop's persistent self-effacement, and self-effacement, yet another manifestation of that great secret gift.

There is perhaps one last thing worth mentioning on this subject. "The End of March" is one of the rare poems in which Bishop actually appears as a "character," and that third stanza has always seemed to me as close to a self-portrait as we're likely to get from her. But look at what that stanza is about. In a way that Robert Bly's famous little poem "Watering the Horse" never really is, this poem is about "giving up all ambition." In Bly's poem the idea is proclaimed so boastfully one suspects it couldn't be true; in Bishop's it's made so seductive one fears it is. If one counts up all the poems Bishop published in book form in her lifetime, one will find just fewer than ninety; in a publishing life that spanned over forty-five years, that comes to about two poems a year. Kafka, I read somewhere, used to have a piece of paper tacked above his writing table, and on that piece of paper was written the single word: "Wait." To read Bishop's poems is to learn, among other things, the meaning of that profound and difficult lesson.

ONE ART

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

— Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

SOME NOTES ON "ONE ART"

The forms themselves seem to invite [some little departure from tradition], in our age of "breakthroughs." Take the villanelle, which didn't really change from "Your eyen two wol slay me sodenly" until, say, 1950. With Empson's famous ones rigor mortis had set in, for any purposes beyond those of vers de société. Still, there were tiny signs. People began repunctuating the key lines so that, each time they recurred, the meaning would be slightly different. Was that just an extension of certain cute effects in Austin Dobson? In any case, "sodenly" Elizabeth's ravishing "One Art" came along, where the key lines seem merely to approximate themselves, and the form, awakened by a kiss, simply toddles off to a new stage in its life, under the proud eye of Mother, or the Muse.

— James Merrill

It is the poems you have lost, the ills
From missing dates, at which the heart expires.
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

— William Empson

§ § § §

Bishop was not often attracted to formal patterns. The key words in various titles show her preference for the bracing leads of rhetorical conventions (exercise, anaphora, argument, conversation, letter, dream, a view) or for occasional premises (visits, arrival, going, wading, sleeping). Twenty years separate her two sestinas; her double-sonnet "The Prodigal Son" appeared in 1951, her ballad "The Burglar of Babylon" in 1964, her last poem "Sonnet" in 1979. When she did write by formula, her line stiffened toward the regularity of the pattern's grid, her tone of voice gave over its intimacy. At the same time, of course, her way with the line and her tone transfigured each of the forms she worked in — none more so, as Merrill notes, than the villanelle.

A poet's debt is her starting-point; her interest cancels it. Bishop's debt to Empson's "Missing Dates" is clear. His variations on "the consequence a life requires" are a study in slow poison. No less than Bishop's imperatives, his series of denials and definitions ("It is not . . . ,""It is . . .") serves as an instruction. And his contradictory rhyme *fill/kill* sets up Bishop's similar (but, because feminine, more difficult) *master/disaster.*

§ § § §

Villanelles are inventions like triangles and their use
is to cause "nature" to find its form only if it can do so
in arbitrary human terms.

— A. R. Ammons

The art of life is passing losses on.

— Robert Frost

Sweet salt embalms me and my head is wet,
everything streams and tells me this is right;
my life's fever is soaking in night sweat —
one life, one writing! But the downward glide
and bias of existing wrings us dry —

— Robert Lowell

§ § § §

The exemplary poems are the grand Wordsworthian encounters — "At the Fishhouses," "The End of March" — that find their moral in their own slow pace. But I remain fascinated by those few poems — uncharacteristic, one might say, except that they are as central to an understanding of her work as anything else — that are *private* (or seem so), that defy decoding, are mysterious in their references and effect. The end of "Roosters" is such a moment, but I am thinking of whole poems that are short, their obliquity (is threatened love the lurking shape?) wrought up to a

pitch of extreme lyricism. I am thinking of "Insomnia," "The Shampoo," "Varick Street," "Conversation," "Rain Towards Morning," and "O Breath." "One Art" is in this mode too. (And it looks more like a short poem as it's now printed, on one page, in *The Complete Poems* than it did, padded over two, in *Geography III*.) It is directly, even painfully autobiographical (or seems so), yet more accessible than the earlier poems. It *shares* its subject with the person who reads and not just with the person written about. Perhaps it seems more accessible because of the quality of resignation that dominates. Or perhaps it is because of the form, that does not mask the experience but strips it of the merely personal. That is to say, the form characterizes the autobiography; in the arbitrary is discovered the essential. The villanelle serves as a field to explore the self's history, but also as a vantage point above it.

It is a familiar advantage in Bishop's poems, achieved by tone rather than by form: "awful but cheerful." Over the poems in *Geography III* could hang, sampler-like, the more dire motto of "The End of March": "perfect! but impossible." The nine poems in the book all exemplify that strain in Bishop — the strain native to Frost and Stevens as well — of dark knowing. "Cold is our element and winter's air / Brings voices as of lions coming down," says Stevens in "The Sun This March." That same element, the element bearable to no mortal, is where Bishop hears her voices. In its own way, "One Art" is their after-echo, the lyrical form a defense against extremes, against both perfection and impossibility.

Her title I take to mean "one art among others," as defense is the obverse of access. And I take "art" to mean "skill," but I want to come back to "art" in its other — primary? secondary? — meaning. What stays to puzzle is that the celebrated skill (a word we associate with *acquiring*) is for *losing*. The peculiar resonance of the phrase "the art of losing" is that the word has two meanings, transitive and intransitive. It can mean to mislay, or to fail. We hear the second meaning in the poem's first line, and the ghost of it throughout. "Lose" has other overtones: to elude, to stray, to

remove, to be deprived. And etymologically (its root is to cut, loosen, divide) it's linked with pairs of terms that define the poem's emotional borders: analyze and solve, forlorn and resolve.

The catalogue of losses, from keys to continent, is a masterful sequence. The key starts a chain of being, objects to ideas, the course of a life. Much is named without being specified. When I read "Then practice losing farther, losing faster," I hear — because of the mother's watch in the next stanza — "losing *father.*" Then, the watch as an emblem of time is joined with the houses' containment of space. If the cities stand for society, then the rivers and continent stand in for nature.

§ § § §

Years foll'wing Years, steal something ev'ry day,
At last they steal us from our selves away;
This subtle Thief of Life, this paltry Time,
What will it leave me, if it snatch my Rhime?

—Alexander Pope

Love hath my name ystrike out his sclat,
And he is strike out of my bokes clene
For evermo; ther is no other mene.

— Geoffrey Chaucer

§ § § §

Before the terrible estrangement both recorded and enacted in the final stanza, there is an odd moment just ahead that cues it:

> I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
> some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
> I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

The rhythm is exact, low-keyed, but the diction is queer. "Vaster" strikes a discordant note, not just because it is a forced rhyme-word, but because it is the first of three "literary" words

(a usage Bishop avoided). The others are "realms" and "shan't," not including the "*Write* it!" that caps the sequence. They are words that seem out of place unless accounted for by some less obvious motive. I mean a reader's, not necessarily the poet's motive: the need to interpret, to allow the poem to make sharp departures from itself, and add layers of meaning. Any poet — any reader — so surprises himself, and form, that psychopomp, leads by its exigencies.

But "realms," secure in mid-line, is a deliberate choice. Is it a deliberate allusion? Brazil *was* a kingdom — but that's not it. "Realm" is a word from books, old books, and one use of it springs immediately to mind: "Much have I travelled in the realms of gold / And many goodly states and kingdoms seen." Keats's sonnet is about acquiring — a poem, a planet; a continent, an ocean; a *power* — in much the same way (and in roughly the same locale) Bishop's Brazilian poems are, and she may be alluding to having abjured the more exotic style of poetry she wrote during her Brazilian years in favor of the sparer style of her later poetry. But "realms" is a royal trope not just for style but for poetry itself, in Keats's and (perhaps? surely!) in Bishop's reckoning here. This being so, could the poem — one of its layered meanings, that is — be about the loss of poetic power, the failure of mastery? If that were the case, then the "you" addressed in the last stanza (and no wonder her "voice" is singled out) is akin to Apollo in Keats's sonnet — say, the enabling god, or familiar muse. That the poem traces its diminishments in so rigorously lyrical, even keening, a pattern; that it must force itself at the end to do what the poet no longer can do, to *Write* — there is the poignancy of this dejection ode.

But to say these days that a poem is "about writing" is both a critical cliché and a method to dismiss. Besides, the "you" of this stanza — her "joking voice" that mocks both mastery and disaster — has all the specific gravity (and general levity) of a real person. The loss of love here is not over and thereby mastered, but threatened: a possibility brooded on, or an act being endured. How Bishop dramatizes this threatened loss is uncanny. "I shan't

have lied," she claims. Under such intense emotional pressure, she shifts to the decorous "shan't," as if the better to distance and control her response to this loss, the newest and last. And again, my mind's ear often substitutes "died" for "lied." In self-defense, lying makes a moral issue out of the heart's existential dilemma; a way of speaking is a habit of being. The real moral force of the stanza comes — and this is true in many other Bishop poems —from her adverbs: *even* losing you; not *too* hard to master. These shades of emphasis are so carefully composed, so lightly sketched in, that their true dramatic power is missed by some readers.

And then that theatrical last line — how severely, how knowingly and helplessly qualified! It reminds me of that extraordinary line in "At the Fishhouses," at three removes from itself: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be." The line here begins with a qualification ("though"), goes on to a suggestion rather than the assertion we might expect of a last line ("it may look"), then to a comparison that's doubled, stuttering ("like . . . like"), interrupted by a parenthetical injunction that is at once confession and compulsion, so that when "disaster" finally comes it sounds with a shocking finality.

The whole stanza is in danger of breaking apart, and breaking down. In this last line the poet's voice literally cracks. The villanelle — that strictest and most intractable of verse forms — can barely control the grief, yet helps the poet keep her balance. The balance of form and content, of "perfect! but impossible."

FIRST DEATH IN NOVA SCOTIA

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:
Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.
Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur's father.

Since Uncle Arthur fired
a bullet into him,
he hadn't said a word.
He kept his own counsel
on his white, frozen lake,
the marble-topped table.
His breast was deep and white,
cold and caressable;
his eyes were red glass,
much to be desired.

"Come," said my mother,
"Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur."
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur's hand.
Arthur's coffin was
a little frosted cake,
and the red-eyed loon eyed it
from his white, frozen lake.

Arthur was very small.
He was all white, like a doll
that hadn't been painted yet.
Jack Frost had started to paint him
the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).
He had just begun on his hair,
a few red strokes, and then
Jack Frost had dropped the brush
and left him white, forever.

The gracious royal couples
were warm in red and ermine;
their feet were well wrapped up
in the ladies' ermine trains.
They invited Arthur to be
the smallest page at court.
But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?

"FIRST DEATH IN NOVA SCOTIA"

Why do I love this poem? Because it is funny and appalling and accurate. The humor draws me in, the contrast between the adult's and the child's perception of death appalls me, and the accuracy strips me.

When a child asks questions, he assumes there are answers, and he faces soup, death, or a stranger on the porch with the same implacable stare. The child in "First Death" stares at the dead loon and the dead cousin as if both deaths meant the same thing: an achievement of permanent worth. The loon has achieved a white marble lake all his own and red glass eyes the envy of every other loon or child. Arthur has acquired a coffin like a frosted cake and has been chosen to be a page, the youngest page, at the court of St. James. The only difference is that the loon's honor is complete, Arthur still has to complete his. The details of transportation still have to be worked out. For the child there is no sting in either death, just practical details to be worked out.

Both the humor that attracts and the irony that appalls are created by the child's point of view. She is quite a small child and has to be lifted to see into the coffin. She observes in a child's sequence of additions rather than an adult's weaving of causes and qualifiers, and she speaks in a rhythm almost as simple as a nursery rhyme: short, three-accent lines, often end-rhymed, with each line containing a single segment of thought or syntax or breath. She sees things her elders are too familiar with to mention, such as the loon's glass eyes, the pictures and names of the royal family, the coldness of the best parlor (which in Victorian houses was almost never used and so was kept unheated in winter; warmth was in the kitchen). She uses adult phrases she has heard and only partly understood, such as "keep his own counsel" or "much to be desired," and phrases which are normally used in other adult contexts, such as "the Maple Leaf (Forever)" from the Canadian national anthem; and she borrows phrases from other

childhood contexts: "He was all white, like a doll," and "eyes shut up tight."

But the skill of the adult who is steering the child's thoughts and writing the poem chooses images for her to notice that will appall the reader beyond the child's understanding of them — the white of the marble table, the white of Arthur's body, the white of the roads outside; the red of the loon's eyes, the red of Arthur's hair, the red of the royal family's robes; and the stillness and cold that pervade both them and the child herself.

The last four lines climax the poem's mounting horror. Without a body how shall we "go"? We shan't, not for any hope, prayer, or evasion. But this *is* the way we go, the way *it goes, I* go! The child's question has stripped me accurately to the one fact that won't dissolve. Elizabeth Bishop has stripped me of my defenses. I guess I love this poem because I want to be stripped.

SONNET

Caught — the bubble
in the spirit-level,
a creature divided;
and the compass needle
wobbling and wavering,
undecided.
Freed — the broken
thermometer's mercury
running away;
and the rainbow-bird
from the narrow bevel
of the empty mirror,
flying wherever
it feels like, gay!

1979

I want to emphasize two impressions that I have of Elizabeth Bishop's work. The first is that her vision was always, right from the start, historical and moral: the vision of a friendly, and removed, prophet, sitting down with us and standing back from us, both at the same time. I saw where a reviewer said that her work had the air of an amnesiac, but it seems to me just the opposite.

The second quality of her life's work that I'd like to take notice of is the increasing daring of her poetry; its opening out, particularly from *Questions of Travel* on to the end of her life, into a freely accepted authority.

This short poem, "Sonnet," was to be the last poem she would write: one of her most purely joyful poems about "the size of our abidance"; a redemptive poem for any particular guests on this earth who start out "caught" and hope to end up "freed." In a published manuscript draft, Bishop tries the first line as "Oh brain, bubble"; in the finished poem, the bubble itself is freed to be more than brain, to be "creature." At the end, the mirror is empty, and the creature is not only freed, but lives to tell the story.

SPREAD RHYTHM

I drift off in a panel van waiting for Isolda
to come back with coffee
so we can drive through the night.

In the roadhouse they are shoulder to shoulder.
The jukebox surrenders to the steady tread of boots,
sloshing pitchers, bright balls breaking
over the felt expanse of green.

My life an endless slum of cardboard boxes
tearing off behind us.
If we do not make the ocean
the desert can claim us
slumped over the wheel with blistered lips.

If we come to a river we'll throw our bones in.
If not we will surely drown
or, like a diamondback
curled up under the saguaro's spiky arms
doze until the cool comes.

The van yaws back onto the Interstate
dogs barking on the overpass
of their transcendental forays
in and out of hell.

Myself, I'll wind up a crazy woman on a boat
or wake alone in the Mojave dreaming
of the Rogers boys who wore white shirts to high school
because they were going to be in finance.

I don't want so much:
a house of native rock, fruit trees
raised from seedlings, chicken in the basket
four days a week.

THE COMPLETE BIRTH OF THE COOL

Under this sun voices on the radio run down,
ponds warp like a record.
In the millyard men soak; roses hang from the neck.
Everyone is thankful for dusk
and the theater's blue tubes of light.
But evenings are a non-church matter.
On the cement step — damp from my swimming suit
I sort out my life or not
an illustrated dictionary on my lap.
If I want hamburger I make it myself.
Behind the wrapped pipes
Sister expels a new litter
in the crawlspace. Even she can see
the moon poling across the water
to guard the giant melon in my patch.
Awe provides for us.

THE SPIRIT HUNTER

A child wakes in a wide bed, tasting the nest
in her gums. There are traces of wet feather,
tiny bones. She watches the wallpaper.
Nothing flies off. Then she walks in her pajamas
to the sidewalk's end, calling her cat. Mr. Reynolds
stands in the four o'clocks. Immaculate.
Never late or on time. She rubs her eyes.
Tie my steed to this tree and shake me
down some figs before I steal on out of here,
his very words. When the parent wanted to know
who could she be talking to so early
she told, *Oh he had some dew, then he left.*
She thought better of mentioning his lachrymose horse.

NOTHING TO DECLARE

When I lived here
the zinnias were brilliant,
spring passed in walks.
One winter I wasn't so young.
I rented a house with Ann Grey
where she wrote a book and I could not.
Cold as we were on the mountain
we wouldn't be moved to the plain.
Afternoons with no sun
a blanket is left on the line.
Hearts go bad
like something open on a shelf.
If you came to hear about roosters,
iron beds, cabinets of ruby glass —
those things are long gone;
deepscreen porches and Sunday's buffet.
This was the school
where they taught us
the Russians send their old
to be melted down for candles.
If I had a daughter I'd tell her
Go far, travel lightly.
If I had a son he'd go to war
over my hard body.
Don't tell me it isn't worth the trouble
carrying on campaigns
for the good and the dead.
The ones I would vote for
never run. I want each and every one
to rejoice in the clotheslines
of the colored peoples of the earth.
Try living where you don't have to see
the sun go down.

If the hunter turns his dogs loose
on your dreams
start early, tell no one
get rid of the scent.

BURNING A BOOK

Protecting each other, right in the center
a few pages glow a long time.
The cover goes first, then outer leaves
curling away, then spine and a scattering.
Truth, brittle and faint, burns easily,
its fire as hot as the fire lies make —
flame doesn't care. You can usually find
a few charred words in the ashes.

And some books ought to burn, trying for character
but just faking it. More disturbing
than book ashes are whole libraries that no one
got around to writing — desolate
towns, miles of unthought in cities,
and the terrorized countryside where wild dogs
own anything that moves. If a book
isn't written, no one needs to burn it —
ignorance can dance in the absence of fire.

So I've burned books. And there are many
I haven't even written, and nobody has.

WINTRY NIGHT, ITS RETICULE

There are suffering mice

Down low between the thatch, down
Where the wind lifts red berries
That float and roll with snow
Across the frozen marsh, the young deer
Watch while a few berries
Drop into the green muck of their tracks —

The lady's-slipper with its fleshy sac,
The bones of a lost hunter strewn
Through sumac —

Spring, at last!

PLEA

Please don't save me
from the angry gods,
the angry God,
I don't want to come to you out of fear.
The wheels are turning on the white mountain,
Homer's hitting his sack in the corner,
wake him,
wake him for me
with your last laugh
so I'll hear you
when I hit the wheels
and he sings.

READING

Our reading matter, what we read
is green,
enters through square windows,
lies on the flagstones
in the tiny vestibule,
far from the rhododendron,
it's just afternoon.

A LACK OF MAIDS

Who'll track down the rocks,
who'll hem the grasses,
who'll secure the squares
beyond the roads?
The ones who ate with spoons
have taken the stones
with them in their shoes
and are long gone.
Who'll help us now,
who'll leave the sun
to its easy game?
Are we the only ones
moving from tree to tree
or will the shadows —
those consolers — soon
come down to us
from their nets?

translated by Stuart Friebert

AUGUST, LOS ANGELES, LULLABY

The pure amnesia of her face,
newborn. I looked so far
into her that, for a while,

the visual held no memory.
Little by little, I returned
to myself, waking to nurse

those first nights in that
familiar room where all
the objects had been altered

imperceptibly: the gardenia
blooming in the dark
in the scarred water glass,

near the phone my handwriting
illegible, the patterned lamp-
shade angled downward and away

from the long mirror where
I stood and looked at
the woman holding her child.

Her face kept dissolving
into expression resembling
my own, but the child's was pure

figurative, resembling no one.
We floated together in the space
a lullaby makes, head to head,

half-sleeping. *Save it,*
my mother would say, meaning
just the opposite. She didn't

want to hear my evidence
against her terrible optimism
for me. And though, despite her,

I can redeem, in a pawnshop
sense, almost any bad moment
from my childhood, I see now

what she must have intended
for me. I felt it for *her,*
watching her as she slept,

watching her such as she
dreamed of sucking, lightheaded
with thirst as my blood flowed

suddenly into tissue that
changed it to milk. No matter
how close I press, there is a

texture that moves between me
and whatever might have injured
us then. Like the curtain's sheer

opacity, it remains drawn
over what view we have of dawn
here in this one-time desert,

now green and replenished,
its perfect climate
unthreatened in memory —

though outside, as usual,
the wind blew, the bough bent,
under the eaves, the hummingbird

touched once the bloodcolored hourglass,
the feeder, then was gone.

THE LOON

The estate bird
sits on the water
outside my window;
  if you watch long
  enough you will see
  her dive
from her canopy,
and in the understory
of the weather,
  in trees,
  beneath the surface,
you might see another
estate bird.

In this scene the call
  goes out to the ground cover,
where you can lay your face,
  unbroken by the ceremonial
tears of the funeral
  on ferns.

Oh deciduous pouch
  of awful leaves
at a would-be cemetery,
  listen to the loon.

You could dream conifers,
the deep roots of burrowing
animals and insects,
    the oppossum
    drunk on his tail
    hearing the interior voice
of secret soil layer
    where we bury her.

INAUGURATION BLUES

— "It takes a helleva nerve to sell water." —

Frederick Douglass never moved
to Washington in this address;
his statue is in Rochester,
in a city park,
a windbreak, my canopy.

In the 60's at LAX
he runs for office;
my brother's dark hand
stretches out in greeting —
no student of the Revolution,
he's selling water to the quake
victims in Santa Monica:
he's in his white uniform,
but nobody's buying
Arrowhead Spring Water!

He takes his hand
surrounded by security;
the eyes of the governor,
still as a pockmark
at Playa Del Ray,
becomes the country's monogram,
markings of the movies,
a concertina of light.

I tell him how in 1934
they closed the WPA theatre
midtown, Orson fell down
the trapdoor before *Citizen*
Kane, before black *Macbeth* uptown:

the black choral section stood
in a one-night stand,
sang spirituals below the poverty
line, below the stage threshold:
those blacks were thespians too,
Roosevelt loved the stage,
the New York Yankees came to power
in spring training; one night at the *Savoy*
Chick Webb battled Count to a standstill
on radio.

For the cameras my brother asks the governor
in his white uniform — will you govern for all
the people? He had given away his water
while others sold theirs, that he was a scout,
that the Lake is no stranger to him,
bowie knots and trails familiar as his tent.
We were tokens then, in shallow water,
integrating the camp swimming pool,
now embarrassed as headmasters on patrol.

There were redwoods; you could find snakes;
among the spruce and sycamores
the sansei boys were quick to break camp
selling all the water they could find
in the flooded pastures of their homeland
where we lived. Those who want crops
without digging in the ground
won't see the harvest in the movies.

MILKWEED

I love wind I love fire
When it puts on long sleeves
and leaps at the grate
Red scarves slacken and snap

That's the life, *life*
Milk sings into the pail
The pond's full of stars
Pumpkins in the field break their gags

I love sparks
tossed across the floor
shiny as water
before it soaks up the grime

But Old Woman, what's the use?
I'm limp hair, pajamas
Elbows and knees
sticking out like broom handles
Breath sour as the sponge
left in a scrub bucket

"Fetch this, fetch that" —
Those two horseheads, my sisters
I hate them

I want to be beautiful, *beautiful*
What must I do?

She gives me a new dress
She gives me till midnight
She has a stick in her hand
She knows how to use it

It figures, half a wish
A ride one way one shoe

But walking home in the moonlight —
White wisps of clouds
tree shadows lacing the road
corn stalks blowing like streamers

I kick off my crinolines and dance, dance
Long after twelve, waltz into the garden
Skirts loose and flaring
Godmother laughing Tufts of milkweed
flung from the stick in her hand

THE GOOSE-GIRL

1

I toss a stone
and the face scatters.
But it comes right back.

As a child I wanted to be
invisible, to see wind,
light rushing through water.

I watched geese grumble and hiss.
They pulled at weeds
as if trying to unplug the pond.

What's real? I'd ask my sisters.
Right here, where I'm standing
is something else standing as well?

Silly goose, they laughed.
But I couldn't stop asking:
what color? what animal
would you be? first thought
when you hear the word mother?
What frightens you most?

2

Now the water's like my child
repeating what I say.

You're too close to the edge.
You're too close to the edge.

Did you hear me?
Did you hear me?

I mean it.
I mean it.

Walking around the pond
phrase after phrase —
I'm tired of hearing myself.
I lean over the edge.

I want to put my hands
on those shoulders,
bring the child so close
I jump into her eyes.

They get bigger and bigger,
circles, striations of blue.
I'm upside down, gliding
through loose tangles,
undulant vines.

O, I come up exhaling
one long breath of surprise.

3

Rain stitches down the pond,
swan feathers, goose
down, wings of maples
too heavy to fly.

I pick my way
through the gray slip of dung.
What do you want? I ask the face
on the water. *Golden egg or real?*

I want the real, the sound of it cracking,
shiny yolk spilling like the birth of the sun.
And when that's done, I want to be free of wanting.

The geese sit plumped on the lawn, soggy pillows.
It's hard to believe they've got wings,
and voices sharp enough to pierce the sky.

Remember that, I tell the face on the water,
the child dawdling behind, the old woman ahead
in shoes too big for herself.

Remember how some wind gets hold of them,
they stretch their necks, their wings.
As though called to this,
as though nothing else mattered
they clamor, they hurl themselves
into the feathery sky.

ILL LIT

Leaves stir overhead;
I write what I'm given to write.

The extension cord to the dark house.

GUESTS

Smell of winter apples on the air;
around me night, the wind, Marie, the stars.
Last night I dreamed I stood here,
this very spot — why I've come —,
lights on in a house across the valley
where there is no house.
Stood here as I lay beside you,
and looked so fondly at those lights
they might have been our home, and why not?
Everyone you see
lives somewhere.
How is this done?

ALCOHOL

You do look a little ill.

But we can do something about that, now.

Can't we.

The fact is you're a shocking wreck.

Do you hear me.

You aren't all alone.

And you could use some help today, packing in the dark, boarding buses north, putting the seat back and grinning with terror flowing over your legs through your fingers and hair . . .

I was always waiting, always here.

Know anyone else who can say that.

My advice to you is think of her for what she is: one more name cut in the scar of your tongue.

What was it you said, "To rather be harmed than harm, is not abject."

Please.

Can we be leaving now.

We like bus trips, remember. Together

we could watch these winter fields slip past, and never care again,

think of it.

I don't have to be anywhere.

THE UNSEEN PIERS UPON WHICH THE WORLD RIDES

Across the lake the white birch trunks
are dirty at the bottom
like the muddy legs of horses;
the leap of a muskelunge
makes a heavy flapping sound
like the wing of an eagle beating the smooth gray water.
I am driven here by a restlessness
that won't let me stop. I have outdistanced
more in myself
than I ever thought possible. The gold furred branches
of the swamp oak above my head
shiver and seem to pray in the wind. What happened
that trees and the wind, the rise of a fish
can't speak to me? In the broken hills of Delphi
I found grottoes that had been the cockpits
of prophets; empty spaces, flat white rocks
seamed like a wrenched floor. All I could bring to mind
was the pale yellow skin of a girl
from Calgary. No oracle at all.
Across the stillness of this evening lake
I can hear every sound. The slamming of a car door,
the scuffing of feet on gravel, the shouts of children,
the glossy, wastrel music of wind chimes
all come with a perfected clarity that makes my heart ache.
There is such distance! Between the upright V
of a branched water maple, a fisherman
in a narrow boat rides
toward the faltering, spendthrift sun.

THE SWEETNESS OF A PEACH

1.
Somebody must have rummaged in these attic boxes
recently, among the masks and dried petticoats, the refolded
telegrams begging on relentlessly for money
and love. My mother dreamed from here she saw a hundred
babies
lying white and naked on the moonlit lawn. 'At first
I thought they were mushrooms,' she said, as if the important
fact
was that she recognized them at all. My father, sleep
swimmer,
pulled the clear waters of his death around him. 'Fatal priest,
come at last,' was among the phrases drifting
down these attic stairs. Here we put on plays;
children taught each other's flesh: prick
and cunt: be gentle when you touch. We flew the hundred
flags
an uncle bought us, from all the disappeared empires of the
world:
Thebes and Rome, Persia and the Confederacy — countries
that haunted us like aches along the bone. My sister found a
snake skin
coiled between two boxes containing our grandmother's diaries
and our mother's soiled summer dresses.

2.
The floor is painted blue.
Above it windows let down a graceful light. The longest, I
think,
lifetime ago, I constructed a fortress up here
that would protect me: stacks
of *Atlantic Monthly* magazines, the red square boxes of my
mother's

former circus duds, my father's horse chains. In the cracks
I mortared in my dreams, all those harlequins
dressed for tropical weather, patriots
of the nighttime country who would never, they swore,
be rounded up. I could be saved then, my sisters too,
their barely explainable bodies moving
among the trees of light. Years later my best friend
fell back across the bed crying, 'Why

am I such a coward?' having reached a place
he could not return from whole. And yet he still lives,
as I live, on my feet in this
Demilitarized Zone, where the generations gather
pretending they are ghosts.
Blue dahlia, iris, the sweet
unenduring delicacy of a daffodil. Look how the world
can turn around: set a single yellow daffodil
in a white vase. Place the vase on a pinewood table
in the light. Step back and spend the next hundred years
staring it down.

3.
In a diary dated August 12, 1893, my grandmother wrote:
'I have seen him walking on the road
when there was no one there, and I cannot understand
how I smell the scent of tea olive, I feel the red dust
on my wrist, I taste the sweetness of a peach,
and he is nothing.'
Grown old, she traveled from town to town
carrying, like an antique brooch, the faint
and singular hope that he might be living there,
unnoticed and uncared for
among the rise and fall of other people's lives.

RED RADISH

Give the seed 1/4 inch
of insults and stand aside.
In two days, they're lined up
in front of your car, loose
parade formation, snout-down
in the earth.
If the earth
has complaints, the radish
listens; if there's fire
in the mountain, he knows.
Untended, bolted, woody,
his pride's that no one
but the humans will eat him
(salt, please).

The night my grandfather left,
he turned out his pockets
on the sinkboard: watchchain,
billfold, and a radish.
No one but me recognized his heart,
so dense and full of turpentine
that, above it, the rafters warped,
shakes parted, and he could
lie back and watch the constellations
wheel up.

CHINESE FINGER TRAP

Something of the yoke the ox's head
fits through, of lobster and crab-
traps, of slender checkvalves in the veins
of legs. As you stoop for apples,
the yellowjackets bumble, and you see
the groundhole they fly to.
Going in,
coming out, who was it you bumped into
in the middle of the woven tunnel?

Was it the strange cousin you bashed
heads with years ago in the Hay-Maze?
You saw stars and told him to back out
because you had many people behind you.
And he was crying too, and said
the same thing.

THREE MOVEMENTS FROM TAI CHI CHUAN

1. White Stork Cools His Wings

Stork's wings fan
like the scalloped hand you can't believe
you've drawn. You ante

and yawn, exposing yourself, certainly.

Stork cocks his head
as the wings fold.
Someone has left the glowing
refrigerator standing
wide open.

2. Repulsing the Monkey

What's war? Who remembers?
Class camping in the boiler room?
Canned milk? Clammy cots? Hey.
In my apartment parking lot I dance;
I hold the ball, the trimmed wheel,
the hoop monkey cannot penetrate.
It's tonic; stalking monkey's
batted away.
To him, one day's
like the next. He stretches, yawns,
sits and is still. You say Good monkey, oh
good monkey, easy monkey, no monkey, NO

3. Wave Hands Like Clouds

Fending deadheads, fending snags,
I strained through the fog for channel markers
and called the bearings back. My father, invisible,
adjusted us. No sunrise, no lighthouse cut that air,
but the harbor buoys did finally, clanging.

He knew the harbor and throttled up. I was satisfied.
I lay back in the prow, bundled, and watched
the ceiling glide by. Like being wheeled to surgery
I thought, on a high, silent cart. I remembered
myself walleyed in the snapping sheets, the ether
dripped on gauze, popping lights, sweetness.
A face
is rising through green water, rising at me through
the floors of a tall, white house: my head's lifted,
banged down. We're out of the harbor, into open lake,
chop.

WORKS IN OLYMPIA, WASHINGTON

You have an oyster and your knife is in it
and the trees shiver and the clouds move
behind them and still it does not yield.
It's like talking to Alma, whose brain is bruised.
For days at work I ask Alma who I am, but
she can't remember. I prompt. Earl and I
ate breakfast, she says, meaning her left arm.
She's surrounded by a terrific denseness,
a thwart; she's calling town and the phone's
disconnected and it's not, it's just
not a dream. I handle Earl. I make her
handle Earl, and gradually she learns. It's work.
They're stubborn and they turn away, but they do,
with bitterness and a strange consistency, yield.

EDEN

"I am very young & ye are very old
wherefore I was afraid." — Job, XII

Sprinklers spot the patio
edges, spot the piano which gives
us Scarlatti or '40s

show tunes but means heaven is not denied
even the reluctant,
those so old they'll have to die twice.
Seedpods smack
& flatten out under the chair-wheels:

around us is a garden
so choked & many-minded that size
is a function
of reconciled disregard.
Ebullient suckers twig out after

ten feet of desperate trying,
their leaves half-clenched
but green. Behind poked-out screens,

inside the rest home,
something even older hums
back, replete, unanimous in the music
my wife uses to call them:

burr-faced grandpas
so inward they are almost amoebic,
the grandmas in lumps under sheets —
the bed-restrained

who are already marked
into zones by straps begin to divide,
loins sinking toward buttocks,
cleft toward cleft until
the first tear is made into two humans —
the one who wants to die

& the left half that will draw all the organs
into altered gravity.
This Saturday I help the muscular nurse

push chairs,
against the rules go in where she does,
wanting to understand

graffiti that says "don't look for me"
or "God took my children first,"
wanting, at last, their wanting,
wanting to bring them all back
for whom we sang.

HUNTING

the October river ochre & so low
the currents fuse
in popple & berry canes,

Dad, I & a nervy retriever
do a cautious hunt-dance,
stepping ataxic, thigh-high steps
where the mud clots

to form birds.
We are following the dog,
progressively losing ourselves
to leaf & the random

weed patterns pheasants use —
a camouflage so complete
we are the only things that aren't

part of its parts.
The sun should show us
where we are in the overwhelming

fecundity of the visible,
but the dog decides
how we stoop, hug past stickers

& not look. Maybe we don't even think
"birds" until my father
says *shoot*
against the sky where the bird is all

outline & hands me the gun.
When I won't, he shoots late —

the second bird whirrs
into a shot-pattern so palpable my eyes prickle

& tear. My father swipes at the dog,
pulls away wing pieces,
punches the dog's head, but it won't let go

the ratty feathers looped in spittle.
I'm eleven; later I understand
the dead clamped in a bloody aurora,

a dog's mouth,
that sometimes is sweet —
it'll nip the grass to clean its taste

& vow never to defect
to appetite,
though it licks your arm

& asking caresses, leaves a streak
of blood.

DARWIN'S FINCHES

1

My mother always called it a nest,
the multi-colored mass harvested

from her six daughters' brushes,
and handed it to one of us

after she had shaped it, as we sat in front
of the fire drying our hair.

She said some birds steal anything, a strand
of spider's web, or horse's mane,

the residue of sheep's wool in the grasses
near a fold

where every summer of her girlhood
hundreds nested.

Since then I have seen plastics stripped
and whittled into a brilliant straw,

and newspapers — the dates, the years —
supporting the underweavings . . .

2

As tonight in our bed by the window
you brush my hair to help me sleep, and clean

the brush as my mother did, offering
the nest to the updraft.

I'd like to think it will be lifted as far
as the river, and catch in some white sycamore,

or drift, too light to sink, into shaded inlets,
the bank-moss, where small fish, frogs, and insects

lay their eggs.
Would this constitute an afterlife?

The story goes that sailors, moored for weeks
off islands they called *paradise*,

stood in the early sunlight
cutting their hair. And the rare

birds there, nameless, almost extinct,
came down around them

and cleaned the decks
and disappeared into the trees above the sea.

LAZARUS

1 *Summer camp in Otovsk*

My father Eliezer is eighty today or eight
hundred years his white hair painlessly covers
his memory going out like a dark cinder
flickers sometimes remembers a face
sometimes a name sometimes both
he is Lonya excited with mama
a child in the woods of Otovsk Lazar dancing in Harbin
with a girl he cannot remember
remembering he'll never forget Eliezer feverish
in a tent and rising feverish
a mountain of potash rising forever
a sled and two dogs
oh Nero in the woods of Otovsk —
  how that dog used to lick my hand

2 *Anatomy*

Was it in this incarnation?
I studied medicine at Tomsk in Siberia.
From the whole human body I'm left
with an image of a cage
on a rib cage collar bone skull. And this house.
So many wings and no flying.

Sometimes they dart
like the sharp flick of a butcher's knife.

Strange, the more the bars break down
the better they work.

And how they try to rise up.
Or at least to get off the floor.

3 *Another slide*

Sometimes I remember an I
who remembers the green sting of sorrel,
the dull silver of the irrigation
ditch in the cool red soil.

And as if in another slide, another
I is projected coming back from a latter-day
love, certain it won't reach
the end that reached us so fast.

And sometimes I'm reminded of still another
I who stares for hours waiting
for what for whom I don't remember.

4 *Night life*

This summer I travelled in my father's footsteps.
Where are the footsteps father where
are the rickshaws in Kowloon the pith helmets
in Victoria. My father's sister Madame Rachel of Harbin
married Mister Etzin of Kobe,
an exporter much older than she.
Japanese silkworms made him a warehouse of silk.
He put bells of ivory buttons around her bed so she'd never
get tired calling for the servants.

Many times as a child I'd summon her image
beyond the strange stamps. After the shelling
she arrived, cascades of perfumed fat, asked to be taken
to see the night life of *Jeruzalim*.

She had a son in England, a big importer
of typewriters. In the end, she asked to be taken
to die in a madhouse in London.

5 *Free will*

Between long silences, Eliezer keeps
saying, "That's how it is." Lazar always piss-
stained from the growth has something
still growing in him.
"Memories are a poison more dangerous
than what pours out of the soul," he suddenly

says when I speak of the past again.
But he's left with no other time,
I'm left with no other time
to change, as free as I want.

translated by Shirley Kaufman

MARCH JOURNAL

— After the Rapture comes, and everyone goes away
Quicker than cream in a cat's mouth,
all of them gone
In an endless slip-knot down the sky
and its pink tongue
Into the black hole of Somewhere Else,

What will we do, left with the empty spaces of our lives
Intact,
the radio frequencies still unchanged,
The same houses up for sale,
Same books unread,
all comfort gone and its comforting . . .

For us, the earth is a turbulent rest,
a different bed
Altogether, and kinder than that —
After the first death is the second,
A little fire in the afterglow,
somewhere to warm your hands.

— The clean, clear line, incised, unbleeding,
Sharp and declarative as a cut
the instant before the blood wells out . . .

— *March Blues*

The insides were blue, the color of Power Putty,
When Luke dissected the dogfish,
a plastic blue

In the whey
sharkskin infenestrated:
Its severed tailfin bobbed like a wing-nut in another pan
As he explained the dye job
and what connected with what,
Its pursed lips skewed and pointed straight-lined at the ceiling,
The insides so blue, so blue . . .

March gets its second wind,
starlings high shine in the trees
As dread puts its left foot down and then the other.
Buds hold their breaths and sit tight.
The weeping cherries
lower their languorous necks and nibble the grass
Sprout ends that jump head first from the ground,
Magnolia drums blue weight
next door when the sun is right.

— Rhythm comes from the roots of the world,
rehearsed and expandable.

— After the ice storm a shower of crystal down from the trees
Shattering over the ground
like cut glass twirling its rainbows,
Sunlight in flushed layers under the clouds,
Twirling and disappearing into the clenched March grass.

— Structure is binary, intent on a resolution,
Its parts tight but the whole loose
and endlessly repetitious.

— And here we stand, caught
In the crucifixal noon
with its bled, attendant bells,
And nothing to answer back with.
Forsythia purrs in its burning shell,
Jonquils, like Dante's angels, appear from their blue shoots.

How can we think to know of another's desire for darkness,
That low coo like a dove's
insistent outside the heart's window?
How can we think to think this?
How can we sit here, crossing out line after line,
Such 5-finger exercises
up and down, learning our scales,

And say that all quartets are eschatological
Heuristically
when the willows swim like medusas through the trees,
Their skins beginning to blister into a 1000 green welts?
How can we think to know these things,
Clouds like full suds in the sky
keeping away, keeping away?

— Form is finite, an undestroyable hush over all things.

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— I think of Issa, a man of few words:
The world of dew
Is the world of dew.
And yet . . .
And yet . . .

— Three words contain
all that we know for sure of the next life
Or the last one: close your eyes.
Everything else is gossip,
false mirrors, trick windows
Flashing like Dutch glass
In the undiminishable sun.

— I write it down in visible ink,
Black words that disappear when held up to the light —
I write it down
not to remember but to forget,
Words like thousands of pieces of shot film
exposed to the sun.
I never see anything but the ground.

— Everyone wants to tell his story.
The Chinese say we live in the world of the 10,000 things,
Each of the 10,000 things
crying out to us
Precisely nothing,
A silence whose tune we've come to understand,
Words like birthmarks,
embolic sunsets drying behind the tongue.
If we were as eloquent,
If what we say could spread the good news the way that dog-
wood does,

Its votive candles
phosphorous and articulate in the green haze
Of spring, surely something would hear us.

— Even a chip of beauty
is beauty intractable in the mind,
Words the color of wind
Moving across the fields there
wind-addled and wind-sprung,
Abstracted as water glints,
The fields lion-colored and rope-colored,
As in a picture of Paradise,
the bodies languishing over the sky
Trailing their dark identities
That drift off and sieve away to the nothingness
Behind them
moving across the fields there
As words move, slowly, trailing their dark identities.

— Our words, like blown kisses, are swallowed by ghosts
Along the way,
their destinations bereft
In a rub of brightness unending:
How distant everything always is,
and yet how close,
Music starting to rise like smoke from under the trees.

— Birds sing an atonal row
unsyncopated
From tree to tree,
dew chants
Whose songs have no words
from tree to tree
When night puts her dark lens in,
One on this limb, two others back there.

— Words, like all things, are caught in their finitude.
They start here, they finish here
No matter how high they rise —
                my judgment is that I know this
And never love anything hard enough
That would stamp me
                and sink me suddenly into bliss.

CONTRIBUTORS

ILSE AICHINGER continues to live and write in Grossgmain, Austria. The first major collection of her work in English (since her novel, **Herod's Children**, appeared in the fifties) was recently published by Logbridge-Rhodes: **Selected Poetry and Prose of Ilse Aichinger**, edited and translated by Allen Chappell.

Wesleyan University Press will publish MARIANNE BORUCH's collection of poems, **View From The Gazebo**, in 1985. Four of the poems in that book first appeared in FIELD.

DEBORAH DIGGES has recently been a Teaching-Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. Her poems have appeared in many magazines, including **Antaeus, The American Poetry Review, The Georgia Review** and **Crazyhorse**.

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TIMOTHY KELLY grew up in Cleveland, graduated from Oberlin, received his Masters Degree in Physical Therapy from the University of Washington in 1981, and has been living since then in Olympia, the southernmost reach of Puget Sound. His backyard is an oyster farm.

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SANDRA McPHERSON, who leads off our Elizabeth Bishop symposium and contributed our cover postcard, is the author of four books of poetry, most recently **Patron Happiness** (Ecco, 1983).

CAROL MUSKE has a new book, **Wyndmere**, due out from Pittsburgh University Press this winter, and is teaching this fall at USC. Her daughter, Annie Cameron, was one year old this August.

SHEROD SANTOS is the author of **Accidental Weather** (Doubleday, 1982). He teaches at the University of Missouri and is spending this year in Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

DENNIS SCHMITZ has had work periodically in FIELD since our first issue, back in 1969. He lives and teaches in Sacramento, California. His new collection, **Singing**, is scheduled to appear from Ecco next spring.

BETSY SHOLL teaches at the University of Southern Maine. Alice James Books has published two collections of her

poetry, and she is finishing work on a new collection, tentatively titled **The Stutterer**.

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ELIZABETH SPIRES is the author of **Globe** (Wesleyan, 1981). Her interview with Elizabeth Bishop appeared in No. 80 of **The Paris Review**. She is a visiting assistant professor in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins this year.

WILLIAM STAFFORD is well-known to our readers. Recent collections of his poetry include **A Glass Face in the Rain** and **Smoke's Way: Poems from Limited Editions, 1968-81**.

AVNER TREININ is professor of physical chemistry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has published five volumes of poetry, most recently **Gleanings of the Forgotten** (1982), from which the poem in this issue was taken. His translator, SHIRLEY KAUFMAN, teaches contemporary poetry at Hebrew University and has a new collection, **Claims**, just out from Sheep Meadow Press.

ALBERTA TURNER's new anthology-text, **Forty-Five Contemporary Poems**, from which we published two selections last spring, is due shortly from Longman. Her most recent book of poems is **A Belfry of Knees** (Alabama).

JEAN VALENTINE has published four books of poetry, most recently **The Messenger** (1979). She is presently working and studying with the Chaplaincy at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City.

DAVID WALKER has just published **The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams** (Princeton).

C. D. WRIGHT, whose work has appeared frequently in FIELD, is teaching this year at Brown. She runs the Lost Roads Press.

CHARLES WRIGHT's new collection, **The Other Side of the River**, appeared from Random House last spring. His translation of the poetry of Dino Campana, **Orphic Songs**, is just out, the newest volume (Number 9) in the FIELD Translation Series.

FRANZ WRIGHT is currently living in Boston and teaching at Emerson College. The poems in this issue are part of a new manuscript he is working on provisionally titled **Joseph Come Back as the Dusk**.

TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS: We would like to correct an error from our Contributors' Notes of FIELD 29, where we reported that TOM LUX's new book would be published by Random House. In fact, the publisher will be Houghton Mifflin. We'd also like to announce that the subject of our next symposium, in FIELD 33, will be Ezra Pound.

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